

The Bells of Europe

A stereophonic documentary
by Peter Leonhard Braun, 1973

translated from German by Michael Stone

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Melting Furnace, Stage One.

At two in the morning the first copper ingot was fed into the furnace.
And more and more down that flaming belly.
Together with the tin 75 hundredweight.
Bell-metal.
Bronze.

Melting Furnace, Stage Two.

The moment's arrived.
The red brew has turned yellowish white: 1120 degrees.
16 bells will be cast this morning.

Melting Furnace, Stage Three.

No one has ever witnessed the birth of a bell.
That happens down below, in the ground.
The 16 moulds are dug in, in front of the furnace,
the earth is pressed down tight to prevent the moulds cracking under the pressure
of the molten metal.

Melting Furnace, Switch Off.

There is always silence before the cast. A tense silence.
The peasants from the Frisian village which is to get three of the new bells, take off their hats.
Their minister is folding his hands. To say grace first. It is as it has always been.

Minister, Praying.

“Let us pray. Almighty God, Creator of all good and perfect gifts, Who Thou hast bestowed upon man the art to cast bells from the ore of the earth, grant us Thine blessing that the new bells cast here today be free from any flaw to proclaim Thine glory and to call to Thy Holy Service Thine faithful flock, saved through Jesus Christ, Our Lord, forever and ever. Amen.”

Foundryman.

“In the name of the Lord let us begin.”

Crane.

One can only hear the birth of a bell.

When – reluctant and heavy- the bronze bubbles from the furnace, a blazing mire, crackling through the feeder pipes until it sears its way into the dug-in moulds so that the air escapes with a hissing sound.

Bell Casting.

Bells.

A bell is a cry out of metal, invented because it was vital for man to give alarm of danger quicker than he could run and spread it further than his own voice would carry.

Fire. Storm. Flood. Attack. Flight.

A bell is a parish-clerk. Calling for assemblies, church services, and tolling the time. It announces a wedding or a christening or a death.

A bell is music. It sings the feasts, glorifies God and jubilates over peace.

A bell is a prostitute. It yells out whatever you wish: murder, conspiracy, revolution, and execution, the plague, famine and war.

A bell is just matter. Copper and tin. And that is its undoing.

Gunfire and Tanks.

In the war years 1940 the Nazi-Regime coldly gives orders that “to safeguard the reserves of metal for long-term conduct of war” all German church bells must be handed over to the armament industry. – Copper and tin are strategic metals. Natural resources on German territory are – negligible.

Hermann Göring’s intentions are that only 10 bells are to be preserved in the whole of Germany. The Church Authorities secure as a final concession the upkeep of 5 percent. Total loss – 47,000 bells. Brass cartridges for grenades and machine-gun ammunition. Copper for the axle bearings of heavy engines. The aircraft industry has a continuous demand for tin. And the German war machine, that armored colossus, rolls slowly across Europe.

The German bells no longer suffice. Poland delivers up bells. Czechoslovakia. Holland. Belgium. France. Italy, Austria, Hungary. 33,000 bells for the German arms industry.

Hand Grenade and Passing Bell.

At the end of the war the silence in Europe is that of the graveyard. Altogether 80,000 bells – are missing. In the church towers there often hangs but one bell, the smallest one, the passing bell.

From the small cemetery outside the Hungarian town of Sopron the passing bell knells for László Bozó. Dead for three days. It knells to say that the priest has just left the house of the gravedigger and is now going towards the chapel.

Chapel.

The relatives sitting, the friends standing. A coffin decked with gold, flowers, burning candles. All over Europe, in every language, this closing scene is the same for everybody.

Male Choir.

The Mourners Rise.

Priest: “You are neither wanderers nor laborers now, but fellows of the Saints and God’s own people. Blessed are those who hear the voice of God and follow it. Amen.”

The Mourners Sit Down.

Priest: “Brothers in Christ, not only here in the cemetery, not only over the graves do we find the cross, but also outside, outside our ancient city there are crosses on the wayside which are part of the traditional character of the town, hailing from the Middle Ages and known as resting crosses. He was a vine grower. When he left the town for his vineyard to work there, he passed these crosses. And in the evenings, going home from work, he would sit there to take a rest. Now, he is no longer a wanderer, no longer a laborer, he is a fellow of the Saints and one with God’s own people. Amen. Let us pray!”

The Passing Bell.

The Relatives at the Graveside.

Priest at the Graveside: “And God said unto Man: “I have raised thee from the dust and to the dust thou shalt return.” Therefore let us bury our brother’s mortal remains that he return to the dust whence he came. Amen.”

The Grave is Filled In.

Ticking of Church-Clock.

In the night of February 1st, 1953, a Sunday, fate keeps ticking along the ever vulnerable Dutch coast. Heavy storms from the Northwest had for days lashed huge masses of water from the Atlantic into the Channel. Then the hurricane – pushing the high tide against the coast. There's a full moon, it's spring-tide, the rivers are at flood level.

And now, in the light of the full moon, Death bestirs Himself to stalk over the dykes, to test whether they will stand firm. Beyond them, in the reclaimed lowlands, all's asleep.

At five o'clock the first dyke gives way. With a thunderous crash the whipped-up sea reaches out for the other side and rushes in so quickly that no one can escape, into the expanse of open country. Almost softly now. When the first sleepers awaken but to drown in their beds they hear nothing but the bursting window panes and the gurgling waters.

Clock-Mechanism, 5 Peals.

The Raging Storm and Heavy Seas.

The Ouwerkerk Bell.

The Mayor of Ouwerkerk, a village right at the edge of the polder island of Schouwen-Duiveland, is woken up by the telephone. The waters are coming. He runs – to the church, up the tower, and pulls at the rope of the only bell to warn the people on the scattered farms.

The island's vanished under water. All that's left is the church and some high ground. Through heavy seas drift the roofs of the houses, with most of the farmers on top. Twenty of them lost their lives this morning. But already in the next village 300 drowned.

Choral Prayer.

Bells Ringing.

At Einsiedeln, a monastery in Switzerland, day starts at five in the morning, one day passing like the next in harmony and safety. The bells remind the padres and brethren to reflect upon God and to serve Him unremittingly by their labor. They exhort them to praise God, to acclaim Our Lord on behalf of all of us who are either not willing or able to do so.

Gregorian Choral.

Bells.

Choral Prayer.

Bells.

Salve Regina.

Gunfire and Shell Bursts.

Following the introduction of heavy artillery in the warfare of the 15th Century the battles in Europe have suddenly become terribly expensive. Without those roaring tubes – no victories, and without ready money they cannot be cast.

They are made of bronze, a metal found most frequently upon the high towers. When it is taken down it requires no payment except for a thank-you to the Good Lord. Amen.

Single Peal.

Through this metallic kinship the bell is getting a hoarse-voices sister, the canon, to join in a duet.

Canon and Bell.

The first to start is Frederic I., the Elector of Brandenburg. He converts the bells of St. Mary's, in Berlin, into guns, being short of money.

During the Thirty-Year-War the Swedes were most assiduous in this kind of conversion. It became martial law to relieve the conquered towns of their bronze.

Czar Peter the Great silenced 500 bell-towers. And during the Siege of Vienna the Turks rendered the whole occupied territory silent.

The French Revolution proceeded legally. According to a decree of 1793 the churches were permitted to keep but one voice each.

Republican armies smash the chimes in Belgium and Holland. And wherever Napoleon goes, his hungry artillery follows.

In Europe the guns chime and the bells fire.

Oppressive Silence.

Since that morning the farmers down the Austrian Oetz-Valley know it will be coming today. There is nothing to see as yet, nothing to hear, but everyone feels it'll come down today.

It is the beginning of August, just the right time for it, towards the end of July it had been too hot and too dry, that's when it had gathered up there, and for the past half hour the air over the valley has been heavy with forebodings. What will be, will be. Lord, abide with us, and St. George, too, our Patron Saint.

This silence, and nothing stirs, not a bird even, all are perched together –

Thunder.

If it hits your house you can stop worrying.

If it crushes the harvest you'll go hungry.

Hail.

If the soil is drummed loose the slope will start slipping, followed by a fall of rubble, and then the scree will catch up with you and bury you.

Oetz-Bell.

It rings at last, we can breathe again. Now it is up to St. George, the storm bell bellows, the Bull of Oetz.

Heave, Bull, heave, heave at the weather, heave it away, heave at the hell-hounds up there, heave, heave them away.

Holy St. George, guide harm away from us, for we are needy.

The Chimes of Dordrecht: Hexafonica.

These are the most joyous bells in Europe and they are rung by Europe's loftiest musicians – at a height of up to 200 feet they sit in their airy belfries, looking down on the rushing throng below, and spread their musical blessings upon the town and everyone in it. They can be solemn and gay, they can laugh, console, and amuse. Bestowing upon Belgium and the Netherlands a radiant heaven even in inclement weather.

The Chimes of Delft: Cecilia.

Church Organ: Village Mass.

An old saying. The most beautiful bells are those you cannot hear from sheer happiness and which yet you can never forget. Then it is as it ought to be.

A Wedding in Upper Bavaria.

Wedding Ceremony.

Priest: "Hias, I ask you, have you examined your conscience before God and have you come here of your own free will to enter into Holy Matrimony with this your bride?"

Hias: "I have."

Priest: "Are you prepared to love your future wife, to honor and keep faith with her until death do you part?"

Hias: "I am."

Priest: "Are you prepared to receive out of the hands of God the children He may grant you, and to bring them up as is the duty of a Christian father?"

Hias: "I am."

Priest: "Maria, I ask you, too, have you examined your conscience before God and have you come here of your own free will to enter into Holy Matrimony with this your groom?"

Maria: "I have."

Priest: "Are you prepared to love your future husband, to honor and keep faith with him until death do you part?"

Maria: "I am."

Priest: "Since you are both resolved to unite in an honest Christian marriage, therefore exchange now the rings of faith and repeat after me."

Priest: "In the name of the Father"

Hias: "In the name of the Father"

Priest: "and the Son"

Hias: "and the Son"

Priest: "and the Holy Ghost"

Hias: "and the Holy Ghost"

Priest: "wear this ring"

Hias: "wear this ring"

Priest: "as a token of your fidelity."

Hias: "as a token of your fidelity."

Preist: "In the name of the Father"

Maira: "In the name of the Father"

Priest: "and the Son"

Maira: "and the Son"

Priest: "and the Holy Ghost"

Maria: "and the Holy Ghost"

Priest: "wear this ring"

Maria: "wear this ring"

Priest: "as a token of your fidelity."

Maria: "as a token of your fidelity."

Priest: "And now I join you in Holy Matrimony, hold each other by the right hand and repeat after me."

Priest: "In the presence of God"

Hias: "In the Presence of God"

Priest: "I take you Maria"

Hias: "I take you Maria"

Priest: "to be my lawfully wedded wife."

Hias: "to be my lawfully wedded wife."

Priest: "In the presence of God"

Maria: "In the presence of God"

Priest: "I take you Hias"

Maria: "I take you Hias"

Priest: "to be my lawfully wedded husband."

Maria: "to be my lawfully wedded husband."

Priest: "In the name of the Church I confirm the union you have now entered into, and I bless it in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost."

Priest, Maria, Hias: "Amen."

Bavarian Choir.

Gunfire and Shell Bursts.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917 there is a death of bells in the Soviet Union. Many are broken up and their bronze is sold to Germany. Because of her needs of copper and tin Germany had lost almost 50 percent of her bells during World War One – but there is no money. So the Russian bronze moves on to France. A part of it is bought by the Parisian bell-foundry Blanchet.

In 1927 an elegant American lady enters the office of Monsieur Blanchet.

"Monsieur, I am Anne Thorburn van Buren, I have come here to donate a bell – to a French village destroyed during the war."

"Madame, a small bell for a village weights 50 kilo, the kilo costs 20 Francs – that's 1000 Francs."

"That is too small."

"Very well, Madame, 100 kilo, that's 2000 Francs."

"Too small."

"The people of that village will be very happy, Madame, 200 kilo, but that's 4000 Francs."

"Too small."

"Madame, too large, your bell will now be too large for a village."

"Well then, cast a bell for a destroyed town."

"Madame, do you want your bell to be placed in the tower of Douaumont? That's 2000 kilo. 40000 Francs. The Church of France cannot pay such a price."

“What’s Douaumont?”

“Douaumont, Madame, that’s Verdun. And Verdun, that’s half a million dead.”

“Bon, that’s large enough.”

Douaumont-Bell.

February 21st, 1916, 7:14 a.m. and thirty seconds.

For two hours Grenadier Alain Trutat has been on guard in the foremost French trench. He is whistling because he is afraid. For days the German offensive has been in the air.

Shell Bursts.

The March of Drums.

Every year until today on February 21st the “Ceux de Verdun” gather together, the survivors, to march over the battlefield, through the sea of crosses, to Douaumont, to the Mass for the Dead.

Requiem, Priest:

“...and when we enter this charnel house in memory of all those whose mortal remains are resting here, when we traverse these fields of battle which are but one big cemetery, then, as St. Paul has said, it does not sorrow us as others which have no hope, for we know that those lying here are enveloped in God’s forgiveness.

That forgiveness which passed the lips of Our Lord in the last moment of His Life, that most tragical moment, that most painful moment, the moment when hate nailed Him to the Cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!” And though it is true that when men kill each other in an adventure, as has happened here, they know not what they are doing, it is also true that they are enveloped in God’s forgiveness.”

Priest: “May this Holy Mass be full of our gratitude towards God for the Forgiveness He grants us, and of our appeal to His mercy that we may be witnesses and apostles of this forgiveness upon which is based the peace in love. Amen.”

Choir.

The military experts say that a new great war will require different metals.

Rockets Sliding into Firing Position.

Such a war will be rather more elegant, and rather less noisy and rather brief.

Rockets Are Fired.

And where do they travel? To you, my friend, to you.

Flying Rockets.

A Flemish Baptism.

Priest: "Number eighteen. Lord, Who Thou hast gathered together all those baptized as one people unto Thy Son Jesus Christ through the water and the Holy Ghost."

Congregation: "Blessed be the Lord."

Priest: "Lord, Who Thou hast taught us to love and hast given us the freedom to live in peace."

Congregation: "Blessed be the Lord."

Priest: "Lord, Who Thou hast given us the task to spread Christ's message to everyone."

Congregation: "Blessed be the Lord."

Priest: "Lord, bestow then Thy blessing upon this water by which these children shall be baptized; Thou hast called them from the love of their parents to a new life in the faith of the Church, that they may gain eternal happiness through Christ, Our Lord."

Congregation: "Amen."

Priest: "Now follows the baptism in separate groups. I will take this group first."

A Baptism in Flemish Ghent, Belgium.

The Baptism.

Priest: "Christof Gustaaf Anna, I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost."

Wailing Baby.

Christof Gustaaf van de Velde, born on February 19th, 1973, at 1:25 a.m., the son and first child of a metal worker, we wish you – let the bells say it:

St. Thomas-Bell, Onze Lieve Vrouwentoren, Antwerp.

Antwerp, you start –

Sacré-Coeur – Peals, Paris.

From France, Sacré- Coeur –

Great Paul, ST. Paul's Cathedral, London.

London, St. Paul's Cathedral –

Chimes of Utrecht-Cathedral.

Utrecht, from the Netherlands –

St. Peter, Zurich.

Zurich, St. Peter –

St. Matthew's, Budapest.

Budapest, the last two bells of St. Matthew's –

Pummerin, St. Stephen's, Vienna.

Vienna, the great bell of St. Stephen's, cast from canons –

The Sigismund-Bell, Cracow.

Cracow, Old Sigismund, cast from canons –

Cologne Cathedral, Stout Peter.

From Germany Cologne Cathedral, Stout Peter, cast from canons –

Ringling Out.